

JISC

Effective Practice with e-Learning

An abstract, artistic composition featuring overlapping playing cards, primarily the Ace of Hearts and Ace of Clubs, set against a background of soft, glowing blue and purple light rays. The cards are slightly blurred and layered, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on geometric forms and light effects.

Case Studies

Share and discuss

University of Highlands and Islands, Perth College

e-Learning in practice case studies

Share and discuss

What is the intended outcome?

Learners engage in group discussion to seek information and to analyse and assess their own and others' decisions.

What is established practice?

- Classroom-based discussion is used to reinforce conceptual learning wherever time allows
- Practitioners set guidelines for effective discussion and invite learners to defend and promote a position and maintain discussion as part of course delivery
- Learners collaborate with their peers and understand the different role requirements in a team, and then present summaries for practitioner and peer review

What advantages can e-learning bring?

- The anonymity of online discussion can encourage participation from learners who are not as active in face-to-face discussion
- Online discussion forums can build learning communities which extend beyond class contact time
- Chat sessions in real time can overcome the barrier of distance, providing social as well as task-focused support
- Participation in discussion can be more effectively scheduled as a component in a course
- Online discussions can allow isolated learners to engage in collaborative group activities

Learning through discussion

University of Highlands and Islands,
Perth College

Background

Perth College offers a range of learning opportunities from one-day courses to degrees. As a member of the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) Millennium Institute, the College also works with partner institutions and a network of learning centres to bring learning to rural communities across Perthshire and Kinross.

The challenge

One such learning programme is the BA in Child and Youth Studies. Learners are attracted to this course from a widely dispersed geographical region. As a result, most learners enrolled on this course elect to study from home. Despite the support infrastructure provided through partner colleges and resident student advisors in regional learning centres, the level of face-to-face contact between learners, their peers and tutors is relatively low. In order to be effective, the provision needs to be supported by well-managed online discussion.

The e-learning advantage

The emphasis on collaborative learning through discussion appears to have had a strong influence on individuals' progress at Perth College. One learner noted that "the pace of discussion rises as our learning increases." Jon Clarke, course leader for Child and Youth Studies, sees the online component of the course not just as a means of engaging learners, but also as an opportunity to maximise learning.

A key benefit of e-learning for learners on this course has been the increased flexibility in the approaches they can take to learning. For example, although learner Irene Sinclair has always sought to gain a degree, the commitment of raising a family has deterred her from enrolling on traditional courses. e-Learning has allowed her study to fit in with her lifestyle.

Lecture notes, papers for critical analysis, learning objects and bespoke materials offered via a Virtual Learning Environment (WebCT), are used as the basis for collaborative discussion online.

Technology can also offer live chat sessions in tutorials to allow learners in isolated locations to talk in real time to tutors and their peers. Social interaction is an essential component of successful learning and is encouraged through an online 'student common room' and 'cyber café'.

A further innovative aspect of this course has been to link collaborative activities with assessment. For each topic, learners are required to make at least three contributions to the discussion each week, one of which must be substantive. With 25% of module marks available being assigned to their contributions, learners take the discussions seriously. This has significantly raised the level of discussion, and feedback indicates that this has had a positive effect on their learning.

Key points for effective practice

- It is important to select an appropriate communication tool for each teaching and learning activity. On this course, real-time chat has worked well for small group tutorial sessions. However, this would not be appropriate as the primary collaboration tool for learners studying at different times. In this context, discussion boards, being asynchronous, work more effectively. They also allow learners the time to reflect on the discussion before contributing.
- Tutor Colin Docherty believes that, just as in the classroom, the progress of discussions needs to be monitored with interventions where required, for example, by posting appropriate questions to stimulate discussion and amplifying the salient points made by learners. Rather than promise a level of tutor interaction which cannot be sustained, it is better to agree realistic timescales which can be met.

- Tutors also need to establish clear rules for how learners should use discussions – and enforce them. Simple guidelines, such as avoiding writing in capitals (which is perceived as SHOUTING) and acknowledging before posting a differing opinion, can have a surprising impact on the success of online discussions.

Final word

With most course activities occurring online, some learners could be disadvantaged if they lack the necessary ICT skills. To address this, all learners enrolling on the course at Perth College undergo diagnostic assessment in ICT and are provided with the training required to enable participation.

